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## **MEDC chief wants Asian jobs in Michigan**

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**By Chris Knappe**

**The Grand Rapids Press**

GRAND RAPIDS -- The state's chief economic developer is headed for Asia next week, anxious to bring jobs back to Michigan but not expecting any miracles.

James Epolito, president and chief executive of Michigan Economic Development Corp., stops short of saying the trip carries any political must-wins during an election year. Gov. Jennifer Granholm, who is heading the trade mission for three days, is shown nearly tied in polls with Republican challenger Dick DeVos, former president of Amway Corp. parent company Alticor Inc.

"I don't feel any great pressure to bring back packages," Epolito said. "Of course, I'd like to, but, at the same time, I think it would be presumptuous of me to fly in there on an investment mission like this with the only thought in my mind being, 'Oh, my God, in order to be successful over there, I've got to bring back a plant or this or that.'"

### **Economic traction**

Election-year politics coupled with a budget slashed 72 percent over the past four years are affecting the state's ability to move forward, he said.

"We do have a legislature, a Republican-controlled legislature, that really doesn't want to see economic development," Epolito said. "There's a few of them that don't want to see any action this year because it's an election year."

Epolito is quick to point out how much things have changed with fewer resources. An organization that once had more than 300 employees making house calls on companies across the country now has 158 employees and a far different strategy for recruiting businesses. Instead of personal visits to companies outside Michigan, MEDC has focused on national conventions, where most other states also have a marketing presence.

Notably absent on Epolito's hit list while in Japan is a visit with officials from Toyota Motor Co., which the state has been wooing for a future car-assembly or engine-plant operation.

Instead, Epolito will focus on other potential targets in Japan, South Korea and China, where he has about 25 appointments. Among those on his list for meetings is Li Shufu, chairman of Geely Automobile Co., an automaker planning to begin exporting vehicles to the United States by 2008.

Geely officials have expressed an interest in setting up North American headquarters in Michigan.

### **Learning the culture**

Epolito said he still is learning how to build relationships with Asian businesses. When he asked Geely's chairman whether he played golf, the response was somewhat incredulous.

"I don't have time to play golf. Do you have time?" Epolito recalled him saying. "I said, 'Well, if I'm playing with you, then I have time.'"



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May 5th, 2005

Mr. Jim Epolito, CEO  
Michigan Economic Development Corporation  
300 N. Washington Square  
Lansing, MI 48913

Dear Mr. Epolito:

I write today quite dismayed after reading your comments printed in the May 4th edition of The Grand Rapids Press article entitled "MEDC Chief Wants Asian Jobs in Michigan". I have worked hard since your appointment to foster a spirit of cooperation both through legislative action (21st Century Jobs Fund, expansion of the Neighborhood Enterprise Zones, Renaissance Zones, funding for administrative costs etc) and moral support as we try to improve Michigan's economic climate.

Ironically, yesterday while you were making your comments, I was meeting with your staff, Jim McBryde and Mark Morante, discussing legislation that your Agency has requested.

You once said to me economic development is a non-partisan issue. Apparently that is not the case. Your comments are truly disappointing.

Sincerely,

Bill Huizenga  
State Representative